

What's Faith Got to Do with It

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John 3:1-17

What we just heard has been made iconic in our lifetime in part because a man in a rainbow wig got great seats to a football game, then more football games, positioning himself so that the TV camera would find him, and when it did, he held up a handmade, poster board sign that said, simply, John 3:16. I looked him up. His name was Rollen Stewart. The Rainbow Man. His first game was a basketball game, 1977. Several years later he was watching an evangelist on TV and became "born again" (a phrase we will explore in a short while), so he added the scripture reference to his dancing, wig-covered ways.

John 3:16. Here it is in the King James Version, what Rainbow Man undoubtedly had in mind. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Here is what our more recent translation offers, the New Revised Standard Version that we share: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

But let's back up a bit. Jesus is speaking of himself here, and it is good to remember the context. A Jewish leader named Nicodemus, a Pharisee, came to visit Jesus under cover of darkness – "Nic at night" as a friend of mine says. He comes at night because the Pharisees are clear in their opposition to Jesus as religious threat. Yet Nicodemus has seen what Jesus is about and he is more than intrigued. He comes at night for his own safety. A complex conversation ensues. Nicodemus calls Jesus "teacher," and tells him that clearly he is sent from God. Then Jesus and Nicodemus begin a fascinating dialogue, enigmatic, befuddling, obtuse and many other things.

At age 98, President Jimmy Carter has announced that that he has entered hospice, meaning that he will no longer pursue medical treatment for whatever health issues arise. His death may not be immediate, but it is eminent. For many reasons I am compelled by Carter's story, including a certain irony at work. That is to say that Jimmy Carter is the most readily recognizable Christian of any recent presidency, identifying himself as a Baptist, teaching Sunday school at his church in Plains, Georgia, writing about matters of faith. Yet his politics

were roundly rejected by a certain type of Christian at the time, many of whom shared similar religious leanings. That's for the historians to sort out.

Why I bring up Carter this morning is that as he was entering the political scene, still just a candidate, an interview was published in a certain magazine – perhaps you remember it – where he self-identified as “born again.” Born again.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order for anyone to know God, they must be born again. Except what Jesus really said was something closer to you must be born “from above” or “born anew.” That's a more accurate representation, according to the biblical scholars, and, really, both meanings – “anew” and “from above” – carry. In the American Christian world, “born again” carries significant connotations, depending on where you stand. “Born from above” has a different feel, different implications, as does “born anew.” One signals a place; one signals a time.

I don't know about you: I want to claim being “born again,” but not with all the trappings, political or spiritual, something more like being renewed, changed for the better, reformed or transformed. And I don't know about you as well, but I *can* claim experience after experience when I have encountered God, had a deeply spiritual experience – in nature, in worship, in a hospital room, volunteering, on the streets, even in a church meeting.

Jesus is saying that we are born in the flesh, all of us, but that we are also called to be born spiritually, be in connection, in relationship, with God and God's spirit.

Alyce McKenzie writes about “spiritual rebirth.” “New birth,” she writes, “...is a breaking free of unbelief into belief. It is a breaking free of darkness into light. It is a breaking free of restricted, judgmental life into abundant life. Like physical birth it involves leaving behind the past and breaking into the present. Like physical birth, sometimes it takes longer than we would like, and at other times it comes upon us before we are ready. Spiritual new birth, while set in motion by God's grace, takes labor on our parts.”

Consider the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. What drove it? Nicodemus was presumably already a spiritual man, a religious leader, schooled in the customs and practices of his tradition. But something was missing. Call it meaning, purpose. Call it spiritual fulfillment. Call it grace. Whatever it was, Nicodemus needed to undergo a spiritual transformation in order to have the connection with God for which he so hungered.

Jesus knows what is at stake. Hear these words again: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed,” Jesus continues, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

American religion almost from the start has emphasized the private parts of all of this, a focus on individual piety – eternal damnation unless some response is made to the offer of salvation. Believe and be saved; do not believe at your eternal peril. Our misplaced focus on “born again” puts the emphasis on us. Born anew, and born from above, in particular, puts the emphasis where it should be – on God’s initiative, on God’s grace.

Elsewhere Jesus says that he came so that we may have abundant life, what he calls “eternal life,” now, not later. Jesus’ enterprise is not withholding grace until a decision is coerced, but demonstrating time and time again what abundant life looks like, and inviting, not strong-arming, but inviting, people into that connection, that relationship, that new reality.

Jesus knew that Nicodemus, perhaps like all of us, walked around living with a combo platter of hope and fear, anxiety and trust. What Jesus wants us to know always, and live like it always, is that hope wins, trust wins, grace wins, love wins. We are called to respond to that vision, to live into it. But we are not called to create it ourselves – that’s what being born “of the Spirit” means. This is not our achievement, and we are not condemned if we fall short in crafting just the right response to this good news. If that were the case, we’d all be in trouble.

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” Augustine wrote that more than 1500 years ago. Perhaps that’s what Nicodemus was experiencing – a restlessness of heart, of soul, a restlessness that could not be met by the routine practice of his religion, a restlessness that took him to Jesus in the nighttime, a restlessness that could not be met until he was born anew, or born from above, or born *into*, a deeper sense of who he was and who God was.

Sandra Schneiders writes that Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a “generous openness.” Something in his life calls him to seek out Jesus. But more so, something about Jesus calls him as well, even as he carries with him -- as we might – big questions about who Jesus is. Perhaps that’s what we experience, something in our own lives, and something in Jesus’, that compels us into a deeper journey, an exploration.

It is Lent. I am all for repentance, for changing habits and practices that do no good to a person’s body or soul, or her or his family or community. But to scare people into repentance as an avenue to salvation, repent or be damned, seems not to be what is happening as Nicodemus seeks Jesus out and they engage each other. If the model is simply to repent in order to get your ticket to heaven punched, then that version of faith seems to represent a smaller, more

limited and restrictive portrait of the God who I believe to have created the heavens and earth, who walks with us in trouble and joy, who calls the world to justice, who dwells with us in the face of every kind of hardship, who gives us fellow travelers to share this journey. Belief in this God, and in the Christ who makes this God incarnate, does not make bad things go away. But it gives those bad things a place to reside, a different place, in order that we might navigate this life and live more fully and freely into its hope.

And remember that all of this begins with a promise, and not a threat, an invitation and not a warning. God so loved the world. God so loved the world. Everything else flows from that, and everything is answered by it, our restlessness, our doubt, our brokenness, our fear. That might not get you to hold up a sign at a football game, let alone wear a rainbow wig, but even better than that, it will allow you to live your days differently, and to share this wondrous love with a hungry world, a world God loves so much. Amen.